Cable TV review

'Guilt or Innocence'

By Irv Letofsky

Whether the accused is declared guilty or not — as in HBO's "Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray" — this peculiar exercise is one clever adventure. As well as perilous. Seriously, a man is being judged by a television jury of his peers? Is this how we want our truths to be determined?

The television "trial" was held in the Shelby County Courthouse in Memphis, with Ray testifying by satellite from his current residence at the Riverbend Prison in Nashville. Judges and lawyers were the judges and lawyers (they did good as themselves), including William Pepper, Ray's pro bono attorney since 1985.

James Earl Ray testifies via satellite on three-hour HBO "retrial."

As entertainment, there were moments. A graying former FBI agent erupted into tears while re-

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lating how he couldn't cope with the bureau's persisting campaign against Dr. King. Pepper was direct and strong; the prosecutor, former federal attorney W. Hickman Ewing Jr., had good jibes in reference to Ray's claim about a single-named mystery man who set him up as the patsy: "There ain't no tooth fairy, there ain't no Santa Claus and their ain't no Raoul."

Even at a nicely trimmed three hours it's very plodding; some dozing jury members would agree. Since HBO won't leak the verdict, all we can depend on is the familiar parlance of television, which dictates that since Ray is too fumbling and inarticulate, he must be guilty. Maybe he should be recast.

GUILT OR INNOCENCE: THE TRIAL OF JAMES EARL RAY
HBO

HBO, Thames Television and Channel 4
Executive producer.....Roger Bolton
Director.....Clive Halls
Producer.....Jack Saltman
Editor.....Alan Ritchie
Music.....Richard Mitchell, Simon May
Legal consultant.....Burt Neuborne
HBO Showcase executive producer.....Colin Callender

Host: Charlayne Hunter-Gault
Judge and attorneys: Marvin E. Frankel, W. Hickman Ewing Jr., Glenn Wright, Dr. William F. Pepper, April Ferguson

Airdate: Saturday, April 4, 8-11 p.m.; also, Wednesday, April 15, 21 and 27